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The Military Topography of Syria's South

Fickle External Support for Moderates; Resurgent Islamic State in Birthplace of the Revolt

Khaled Yacoub Oweis

The Russian air attacks on Aleppo have diverted attention from Moscow's intervention intended to secure Bashar al-Assad's position in Damascus. Extending beyond northern Syria, Moscow's direct military involvement has instilled fear in the countries backing the non-jihadist rebel units in the south. Known as the Southern Front, they are based in the area stretching from south of the capital to the Jordanian border and close to the Israeli border. Hardline Islamist rebels, as well as so-called Islamic State (IS), are poised to gain as moderates are undermined. A rethink on ways to empower the Southern Front and once more put pressure on Assad is overdue if the region and its civil structures are to escape capture by the regime and further penetration by the Jihadists is to be prevented – scenarios that could create a new wave of refugees towards Jordan. Due to the south's strategic importance, Israel has emerged as a veto player in the neighborhood, helping to curb Russian bombing as Moscow acts with different interests in the south and the north.

Southern Syria has been spared the war of all-against-all that has plagued many non-regime controlled areas in Syria. Inter-rebel violence has been relatively contained, partly due to the societal nature of the south. A culture of tolerance, higher education and strong family links has helped to produce a backbone of moderate forces in the Hauran Plain (see Map, p. 4), where the first mass protests against four decades of Assad family rule broke out in March 2011. The area stretches from the outskirts of Damascus to the border with Jordan and the foothills of the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. In 2014, two years after the revolt had become militarized, non-jihadist rebel groups formed

the Southern Front. The formation is backed by a disjointed grouping known as the Military Operations Centre (MOC). Based in Jordan, it consists of Western nations (United States, United Kingdom and France), Arab countries (Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) and Turkey. Jordanian intelligence has helped to keep hardline Islamist rebels in the south, such as the al-Qaeda-linked Nusra Front, in check, in contrast with northern regions on the border with Turkey. The spread of Islamic State (IS) was also contained to two pockets straddling Deraa governorate. But in 2016, the group mounted a sustained infiltration from the

Euphrates River basin that brought it closer to the Hauran Plain and the Jordanian border.

Rebel Setbacks

Support for the moderate rebels in the south lost momentum after the Russian intervention, which re-opened a recruiting avenue for the Nusra Front and other ultra-hardline rebels who market themselves as unwavering in their Jihadism against the Assad regime. In July 2016, the Nusra Front renamed itself the “Front for the Conquest of the Levant” and broke off organizational ties with al-Qaeda.

The non-Jihadists had stolen a march on the hardliners by playing a more pro-active role in the war against Assad since the formation of the Southern Front. As outside support for the new formation grew, reliance on the Nusra Front to help fight Assad’s forces lessened. But Moscow’s intervention has reversed strategic rebel gains that had the potential to threaten Assad’s hold on Damascus. Despite internal rivalries and the competing interests of the MOC members, the Southern Front had kept growing as a force – until the Russian intervention in September 2015.

At the beginning of 2015, Southern Front units along with other rebels captured Shaykh Maskeen, a hub for Assad’s forces on the old Deraa-Damascus road. By mid-2015, the rebels had encroached on the regime’s buffer zone around Damascus through an area called the Triangle of Death. This covers southern approaches to the capital in the Qunaitira and Deraa governorates, and has its pivot at the town of Kanaker, 30 kilometers from Damascus. As the Russian bombardment hit the rebel backlines in the south, the backers of the Southern Front made it clear to their allies that they would not support operations in the Triangle of Death. Assad’s forces and their Iranian-backed Hezbollah ally captured Shaykh Maskeen in January 2016, after the town was pulverized by Russian aerial bombardment.

The Southern Front

Nominally includes more than 50 brigades, comprising most of the units fighting under the Free Syrian Army (FSA) banner in southern Syria. A few large brigades, with an estimated combined strength of 8,000 fighters, form the core of the formation. They are drawn from FSA units in the southern suburbs of Damascus, the Qunaitira and Deraa governorates. The main components of the Southern Front include:

Shabab al-Sunna: spearheaded a Southern Front attack in 2015 that captured the ancient city of Busra al-Sham. Shabab al-Sunna is strongly supported by the United Arab Emirates.

The Artillery Regiment: The only rebel unit with a substantial arsenal of artillery and rockets.

Al-Furqan Brigade: Pragmatic Salafists who cooperate with more secular brigades and have been in a de-facto truce with the regime in their home region of Kanaker since 2014.

Al-Mutaz Billah: One of the first rebel units in Syria to operate under the FSA banner. Headed by Khaled al-Nabulsi, a colonel who defected from Assad’s air force.

Al-Yarmouk Army: A large formation seen as close to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and linked to Turkey and Qatar.

The Syria Revolutionaries Front: Suffered a blow in March 2016 when its head, Captain Abu Hamza al-Nuaimi, was killed in car-bomb attack in the governorate of Qunaitira. But the group remains a player in the area.

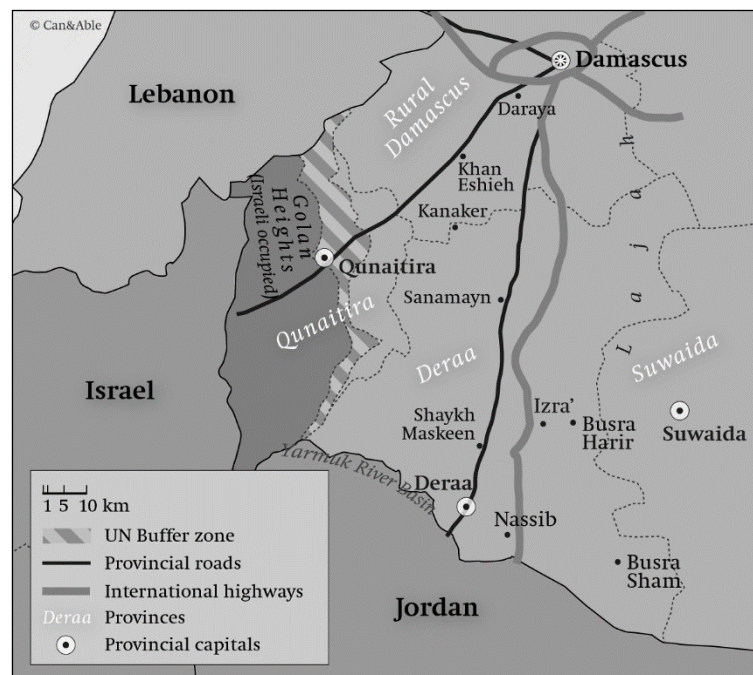
Al-Hamza Brigade: Based in the town of Ankhil, scene of an attack blamed on IS that killed nine members of the group.

In another major gain for regime forces, in November 2016 rebels evacuated the Palestinian refugee camp of Khan Eshieh, 20 kilometers southwest of Damascus, after a two-month siege. Under a surrender deal guaranteed by Russia, 2,000 to 3,000 people were transferred by buses, mainly to the northern province of Idlib. They mostly comprised fighters from the Southern Front, the Salafist Ahrar al-Sham group and the Nusra Front, as well as their families. By the time of the evacuation, 8,000 Palestinian refugees were still in the camp, along with several thousand Syrians who had fled Damascus suburbs overrun by the regime. Ahrar al-Sham, which is not in the Southern Front, traded blame with the other rebels for failing to open a supply line to Khan Eshieh from the south. Ultimately, it was local commanders from the various rebel factions in the camp who decided that they could no longer cope with the siege and the aerial bombardment.

The capture of Khan Eshieh highlighted the Russian-backed ‘piecemeal’ strategy employed by the regime and its Shiite militia allies from Lebanon and Iraq. The strategy focuses on attacking and besieging a single rebel city, town or neighborhood at a time, destroying it, and then moving on to adjacent areas. In the areas around Damascus, for example, the fall of Khan Eshieh was preceded by the fall of the suburb of Daraya, which was besieged for years. But Russia’s halting of rebel advances from the south was crucial for the regime, as it added a layer to the buffer zone around Assad’s seat of power.

The other – and more high-profile – goal of Moscow’s intervention was to push back a Turkish and Gulf-backed rebel alliance in northern Syria. The alliance, named the Army of Conquest (Jaish al-Fath), had advanced through the coastal province of Latakia, home to Russia’s main military bases in Syria. The core of the alliance consisted of the Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham, which have been less significant players in Deraa and other rural regions in southern Syria. After the Russian intervention,

Map: Southern Syria



however, with salaries being cut and resources dwindling, several Southern Front commanders reported increased defections from their units. The defectors mainly headed to Qunaitira governorate and were recruited by the more radical Ahrar al-Sham. Organized criminality is also reported to be on the rise on the Hauran Plain as a result of the rebels being forced to abandon some fronts against the regime, creating larger numbers of idle fighters.

Operational Failures

The retreat of the southern rebels has highlighted the growing military asymmetry generated by the upgraded weaponry that the regime has been receiving from Russia and Iran, and the difficulty of taking regime bases without air support.

Organizationally, the Southern Front has suffered from huge gaps in coordination and from mistrust between its different local and ideological components, which retain strong allegiances to their home areas, even if the latter have been a barrier against the Jihadists. These flaws came to the fore just before the Russian interven-

tion in the failure of a major offensive, dubbed the ‘Storm of the South’, to take the provincial capital of Deraa. The offensive was launched despite lacking an overall command. Several rebel clusters failed to move together from different directions, leaving the regime able to concentrate on repelling individual attacks.

Lacking firepower, the Southern Front has mostly stopped outright its attacks to take cities and towns from the regime. The rebels have instead shifted to trying to isolate regime areas by controlling roads. In turn, the regime has increasingly protected roads with fortifications and dugouts. In the fall of 2016, the rebels sought to restrict the regime’s access by road to Deraa city, which – like the rest of the Hauran Plain – has been divided for years, with loyalist forces holding about three quarters of the city and the rebels the rest. The operation depended on taking a regime fortification southwest of Shaykh Maskeen. The attack failed, and up to 50 rebels who had trained as assault troops were killed.

Squabbling Arab Backers

Lack of agreement among the Arab and Western countries supporting the Southern Front on strategic goals has exacerbated the fragmentation of the rebels. Most MOC members were scared off by the Russian intervention, with Jordan and the United Arab Emirates initially seeing an opportunity to ally with Moscow and cut off support for the rebels. Others, particularly Qatar and Saudi Arabia, were not as keen. The differences have been especially acute between the MOC’s Arab members – Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates – who often push rebels in different directions and play off one group against the other. In May 2016, the four countries supported a US-led drive to create a joint leadership for the Southern Front, but then contributed to undermining it when it came to implementation and movement of staff. After a series of meetings in Jordan, a seven-member command was

chosen, headed by Hassan Ibrahim, a former major who had defected from Assad’s army and eventually joined the opposition’s High Negotiation Committee (HNC) for the Geneva peace talks. By the end of the year, the joint command had become defunct. None of the Arab countries supposedly on board gave it serious practical backing, with each country regarding certain members of staff in the nascent command as untrustworthy or ideologically unsuitable.

A major divide has centered on rebel connections with the Muslim Brotherhood. Qatari and Turkish support for the Brotherhood has pitted the two countries against Jordan and the United Arab Emirates within the MOC. Lacking the financial might of Gulf countries, Jordan still punches above its weight in the shaping of the Southern Front. Jordan also hosts US squadrons that attack Syrian Jihadists from its bases. In a deepening of the ideological rifts, in December 2016 the Yarmouk Army, one of the large players within the Southern Front, announced the formation of a new alliance belonging to the Free Syrian Army (FSA). The FSA is an umbrella grouping of non-Jihadist rebels across the country that has seldom functioned as an organization since it was founded in 2011. But the Yarmouk Army has left the door open by not officially breaking off from the Southern Front. On the civilian side, the Brotherhood ended up dominating many of the opposition’s local councils in the south. Increasing religiosity in the population amidst the violence played into the group’s hand on the local level. But there remain substantial civic organizations on the Hauran Plain that operate outside the Brotherhood’s influence.

Meanwhile Israel, which is outside the MOC, has played a role Israeli officials describe as reliant on “soft power”. It has propped up some brigades to keep the peace on the Golan Heights front and placated others by receiving wounded civilians and fighters. The Israeli establishment does not want to see Iran or Hezbollah on the

Golan Heights frontier and has in general learned to live with the Sunni rebels, including the more hardline ones. In a rare incident in November 2016, Israel said its troops killed four militants linked to the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigades, an IS affiliate, after they attacked an Israeli patrol on the Golan Heights.

IS Rises from the Ashes

The non-Jihadists in the south have been further undermined by having to fight a two-pronged war against the regime and IS. The group, under pressure in Iraq and eastern Syria, experienced a resurgence in the south in 2016. It remains on the periphery of the Hauran Plain, but it has reconsolidated in its hub in the Yarmouk River basin. IS also has fighters based in al-Lajah, a rugged region between the governorates of Suwaida and Deraa. It appears to be aiming to link its foothold in Lajah with forward positions it has set up in al-Badiya, the semi-desert steppe extending to the border point where Syria, Jordan and Iraq meet.

The Yarmouk River basin

IS was on the verge of extinction on the Hauran Plain in 2015 after the top leadership of its main affiliate, the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigades, was assassinated by the Nusra Front (SWP Comments 34/2016, July 2016). A smaller affiliate, Jaish al-Jihad, was routed by the FSA, and a third affiliate, the Islamic Muthanna Movement, had suffered high casualties. But the three groups consolidated in the Yarmouk River basin, which borders Jordan and the Golan Heights, in mid-2016. They formed the Army of Khaled bin al-Walid, named after the Arab Muslim commander who defeated the Byzantines in the area.

In a boost to IS, a tactical alliance between the Southern Front and the Nusra Front in the Yarmouk River basin appears to have broken down. FSA units, needing all the support they could muster, fought along the same frontlines against IS for

four months, until the Nusra Front scaled down its participation in July 2016. The pullout came as the US started to target the leadership of the Nusra Front in northern Syria more heavily. On social media, Jihadist clerics also criticized the preoccupation with fighting IS in the south while the regime consolidated and the FSA weakened. The Nusra Front appears to view this as an opening to increase its support in the south by taking on the Assad regime.

Despite IS's many foes, the rough terrain and clan-based social mores of the area have played to its advantage. The Southern Front or anyone else taking on the group would require a heavy numerical advantage to wage a decisive battle against the 800 or so IS fighters in the Yarmouk River basin. The MOC has been pushing the Southern Front to take on IS, but not enough fighters appear willing to risk blood feuds with established families in the Yarmouk River basin, whose members have joined the IS affiliates.

Al-Lajah

Similar factors of terrain and society have protected IS in a foothold it has carved out in the volcanic al-Lajah region on the northeastern edge of Deraa. The region is inhabited by Bedouins, many of whom have sided with the FSA, which has strengthened the Bedouins' hands in historic land disputes with the Druze inhabitants in the nearby governorate of Suwaida.

Al-Badiya

The most marked IS movement of 2106 has been its buildup in the expanse of Badiya region to the east of Suwaida. This triangular area stretches from the town of al-Dumair, northeast of Damascus, to Suwaida and on to the point where the Syrian, Iraqi and Jordanian borders meet. FSA sources have been observing an influx of IS fighters from the Euphrates River basin into the Badiya. The group has set up posts at water resources, in areas that could serve as

supply points, and in cave territory that provides natural cover. IS's recapture of the desert city of Palmyra from the regime in December 2016 could enhance supply lines to Badiya. The group appears to be preparing the region as an alternative base for redeployment in case the largest two cities under its control – the Iraqi city of Mosul and the Syrian city of Raqqa – should fall.

Strategy of Local Liquidations

Lacking the depth and outright numbers to mount a pincer movement on the Hauran Plain, IS has resorted to assassinations of FSA commanders on the village and town level to weaken the FSA at its core. Scores of FSA officers, most of whom were affiliated with the Southern Front, were targeted in 2016. With the objective of undermining opposition structures, the campaign has also targeted officials in the opposition's Syrian Interim Government and the justice system (Dar al-'Adel), which in rebel areas have replaced the regime. One of the more spectacular assassinations linked to IS came close to wiping out the top military and civic tier of the opposition in the south when a young suicide bomber blew himself up at a ceremony marking the opening of a police station in the town of Ankhil. The attack in September 2016 killed 16 people, including Yacoub Ammar, the minister for local administration in the opposition government. The rest of the dead were mostly members of the Hamza Division, a Southern Front formation.

The Scramble Against IS

The United States, Jordan and other MOC members rushed to respond to the IS advances in Badiya largely by building new forces outside the Southern Front with little familiarity with the local terrain. So far, these have amounted to little more than mercenary forces more interested in making quick money through the weapons trade or other smuggling than in getting involved in serious combat.

With IS potentially straddling a long stretch of the Jordanian border, Jordan has set its own proxies to create a buffer in the Badiya region. But their fighting ability remains largely modest. One hastily put together group, the US and Jordanian-backed New Syrian Army, failed in its debut in March 2016 to make a dent against IS in the Syrian town of al-Tanf, despite being supported by US airstrikes. Three months later, a desert camp belonging to the New Syrian Army was hit by what the US has described as a Russian air strike. By the end of the year, the group had dwindled in numbers from a few hundred to a few dozen. Another force has been the Army of the Clans (Jaish al-Asha'er), a Jordanian proxy led by Rakan al-Khudair, a former businessman from Deraa who tried to mediate a peaceful solution to grievances of Deraa in 2011 and was rebuffed by the regime. Jordan assigned the Army of the Clans, along with other proxies, to policing the Rukban border refugee camp and al-Hadlat, a smaller camp that had sprung in the Badiya as Jordan continued in its refusal to let in the refugees.

By contrast, one group with a track record of fighting IS was the Forces of Martyr Ahmad al-'Abdu, which belongs to the Southern Front. The unit received strong support from the MOC until their leader Bakkour al-Salim was killed at his camp in Badiya in a suicide attack blamed on IS. Bakkour was also part of the opposition's peace-talks team. His rebel group could not compensate for his death and lost its luster.

Missing Incentives for Fighting IS

The Western response to the IS advances in the south has been mostly to replicate the approach the US employed in northern Syria with the Kurdish PYD militia (the Syrian branch of the Turkish PKK). It mainly consists of arms, air support and political cover. Washington has shown little objection to the militia's drive for a Kurdish territorial and political ascendancy in northern Syria. In the mainly Arab Sunni

south, US support for the rebels' cause – the toppling of the Assad regime – has been far less consistent. Even while Washington was facilitating the supply of the Southern Front with weapons, it made it clear that, as long as the Southern Front was committed to fighting Assad, it would not receive any air support even against IS. Diplomatically, Washington has been paying lip service since 2015 to a political transition that could ease the grip of Assad and his predominantly Alawite entourage on the state and security apparatus. Yet, on the southern local scene, the Assad regime has had a free hand to hit town after town while the mainly Sunni would-be recruits were expected to forego any retribution and fight IS – even though IS was not responsible for the destruction in their communities.

While Washington was willing to extend a de-facto safe zone over Kurdish regions to prevent regime air attacks when the PYD clashed briefly with Assad's forces in al-Hasaka (northeastern Syria) in August 2016, it has shown no inclination to do so in the south. With little motivation among Sunnis to fight their IS coreligionists, few observers have confidence in the ability of the Jordanian-backed auxiliaries to fight an all-out war against IS.

Meanwhile, the Syrian regime and IS seem to have adopted a strategy of avoiding confrontation with each other in the south. Even if IS, driven by a quest for resources, were to push through Badiya to the agriculturally more productive Suwaida region, the regime would be unlikely to commit significant troops to defending Druze population centers in Suwaida if they came under a concerted IS attack, as this would raise the possibility of intervention by Israel. The Druze of Israel have members in the Israeli army, and the Israel has signaled that it would consider military action to protect the Druze in Syria.

This leaves the Assad regime with a balance of power. Flush from the capture of Aleppo, it would like to build on this momentum by showing that it will live up to its commitment to regain the whole of

Syria. But in the south, Russia is unlikely to give Assad a green light, or unleash bombardments on the scale it deployed in the north to allow pro-Assad forces to retake large tracts of territory. If Russia levels more rebel ground from the air, Hezbollah and Iran could reach the Golan Heights frontier – something both Moscow and Israel oppose. New refugees could also put more pressure on Jordan, with which Moscow is keen to maintain good ties. But the regime could still pursue its strategy of trying to take towns one by one, or seek a symbolic victory, such as capturing a border crossing with Jordan. One vulnerable spot, due to the regime's presence in the city, is a crossing point on the southern outskirts of Deraa.

Options for External Actors

The countries nominally supporting the Syrian opposition stood by as Russia and the Assad regime destroyed East Aleppo. Now they will have the chance to take a more active part in preventing a meltdown in the south that could cause mass displacement and loss of life, and have huge geopolitical repercussions.

Southern Syria is too important strategically to let the Southern Front lose its role as the lynchpin of the region's rebels. A Jihadi takeover or Hezbollah advance would risk triggering an Israeli intervention to shield its forces on the Golan Heights and in the Israeli interior and/or to protect the Druze in Suwaida. Jordan could also be drawn into sending troops into southern Syria as the establishment faces an increasingly fragile situation domestically.

Even if chances of success are low, efforts should be made to get Moscow to keep its planes from doling out more destruction and at least preserve the existing front lines. In its operations in the south, Moscow has yielded to a de-facto Israeli veto on how far it can go and will most likely not allow for an open Iranian corridor stretching from Iran to the Golan Heights.

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Moscow also needs to be reminded that a stable Jordan is in everyone's interests and that maintaining a balance of power in the south prevents more pressure from being put on Jordan in terms of refugees and the rise of Jihadism next doors.

Given the regime's post-Aleppo euphoria and the mounting Iranian influence within loyalist circles, Assad might be tempted to re-conquer the south, starting with the line of control with Israel (Qunaitira) and the border crossings with Jordan. Western reactions to Aleppo are therefore crucial, including symbolically, for the future dynamics in the south. As the regime was gloatingly delivering the fatal blow in Aleppo, a helpless and divided EU declared that it would help to reconstruct Syria provided the country moved toward a political transition – which no one in Western policy-making seriously believes is likely with Assad so strengthened. Instead of resigning itself to an "Assad-only future", the EU could turn its attention to protecting the contiguous civic structures that have so far escaped annihilation by the regime, most widely in the south.

Europe could contribute to stabilizing the rebel regions and limiting the appeal of Jihadists to local populations by restoring the Southern Front as the bulwark against Assad. A trust deficit between Washington and the rebels has prevented FSA units from being extended the dedicated backing enjoyed by the Kurdish militia in the north. Deepening the scope of military support could prevent the regime from making even symbolic victories and would send a signal to the southern population that they will not be abandoned. Building trust with the opposition and local population and strengthening the Southern Front may be the only effective measure against the possible relocation of massive IS contingents from Iraq and the Euphrates River Valley to Badiya and beyond.

Here again, the streamlining of international backing would help unify the local structures and make them more democratic. It also needs to be recognized that,

despite Assad's recent advances, the Syrian conflict could yet continue for the long term. The creation of an overall international organization based in Jordan, with the donors and backers as its members, could help manage the flows of aid and civic support, and make it easier for the support to get through Jordan to its destination. Jordan's security concerns have lessened its initial welcome of the Syrian opposition after the revolt. As more regional actors have got involved in the Syrian conflict, Jordan has sometimes put the peaceful civic activists as well as the officers who have fled there who lack connections with influential patrons in its own version of the Soviet Hotel Lux. With the unspoken threat of being thrown back into Syria hanging over them, they have little room to maneuver independently or open lines of contact and act as liaisons to help the regions they came from. Their situation could be normalized if efforts were made to solve the animosity hanging over the relations between the Arab MOC members.

Militarily and politically, little could be achieved to streamline the MOC without the weight of the US. It is not clear if the incoming US Administration will listen to advice from the established governments of Europe, especially as more refugees would boost Trump-style politics on the continent. But it is essential for the Trump team to get the message that the fight against terror needs to go beyond the ongoing air campaign and support for the Kurdish militia if it is to stop the Jihadists and IS from becoming the only game in town for those opposing the regime.